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‘Learning to Play the Game’: How schools with below average attainment can support the decision-making processes for high-potential learners in applying for university

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Abstract

The article explores how schools with below average attainment can support high-attaining learners in their decision making about university. We report on a project involving longitudinal case studies of 43 high-achieving learners from a range of backgrounds across five institutions, during their sixth form career in 2013/14 and 2014/15, focusing on ways in which aspirations towards university develop. To understand schools’ roles in supporting learners, we draw on Hart’s (2012, 2016) analytical framework which sees the development of aspiration for higher education as a capability - the development of the opportunity freedoms of young people to pursue future trajectories that they have reason to value. We draw attention to the factors that facilitate or hinder this development, and highlight the key crunch points at which this feeds into young people’s decision making about university. We suggest that policy and practice should move beyond a traditional focus on the role of schools in raising aspirations amongst learners from non-traditional backgrounds. Instead, there should be a focus on how schools can support young people to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the university landscape, so that young people do not rule out options without fully understanding them. This will in turn lead to young people being able to make informed choices linked to future trajectories they have reason to value. ‘Learning to play the game’ of attending Russell Group universities needs to be seen as part of the development of this wider capability to aspire.

Keywords

aspirations; widening participation; capabilities approach

Introduction

Despite increasing financial costs of higher education (HE) to the student, university attendance is increasing year-on-year (HESA, 2018). Within this increase in university applications and attendance, however, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are still under-represented - especially in UK Russell Group (RG) universities (Boliver, 2013; DfE, 2017; Thiele et al, 2017). These are selective, research-intensive universities with high entrance requirements and high tuition fees. In particular, there has been growing concern in recent years about the proportion of learners from disadvantaged schools who are able to gain entrance to highly selective universities (Montacute, 2018; OFSTED,

2013; Wyness, 2017). Increasing the proportion of learners from low performing schools is a key indicator in fair access agreements between the Office for Students (previously the Office for Fair Access) in England and RG universities. Data from the Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (Tikly et al, 2016) shows stark differences in the rates at which high-potential learners (those with 5 or more GCSEs at A or A*) from different types of school attended RG universities. A high-potential learner in a top-performing school (with high levels of average attainment at A-level) was nearly three times as likely as one in a low-performing school to attend RG, even though all these learners were in the top 25% nationally in terms of individual GCSE performance. This demonstrates the importance of the school's role in supporting young people's decision-making with respect to HE.

Much research has focused on the relationship between attendance at elite universities and learner background characteristics including social class, ethnicity and whether learners attended a state or a private school (eg Boliver, 2016; Loveday, 2015; Marginson, 2016; Montacute, 2018; Wyness, 2017). Theile et al (2016) highlight discourses in research literature and university admission policies around contextual data, where students from more disadvantaged schools and backgrounds have less stringent admissions requirements to high-tariff universities than those from more advantaged contexts. Much of this literature, however, focuses on student performance once in university, with limited research focusing specifically on applications to RG universities, and whether learners are from high- or low-performing schools. Through focusing on the role of school – specifically on how low-performing schools support high-potential learners - our research contributes to the literature. We aim to identify institutional factors influencing choice of university by high-potential learners. With the focus on high-potential learners, prior attainment (the major predictor of RG attendance) is essentially taken care of. The wide variation in the rate of HE entrance between schools and colleges with low average performance at age 18 (DfE, 2017) suggests that the practices of teachers and other staff can make a great deal of difference to the outcomes of learners in this context (Donnelly, 2015), and that they are likely to be of greatest importance when there are fewer peer and parental role models available (Dilnot, 2016).

This paper aims to understand how high-attaining learners in schools with low average attainment negotiate the process of deciding which universities to apply for (with particular focus on RG universities), and schools' role in supporting this. While the context of our research is English, there are many internationally relevant lessons to be learnt about how schools and colleges can influence young people's decision making about HE.

The capability to aspire

Education policy in industrialised countries is thought to be influenced by instrumentalist discourses, with investment in human capital seen as leading to economic returns, at national and individual levels (Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Marginson, 2017). This has contributed to governmental pushes for expansion of HE in many countries, including England. Hart (2012) is critical of assumptions around aspirations that underpin governmental widening participation agendas. She highlights implicit

assumptions that aspirations to attend university are superior to other aspirations, (such as following more vocational routes). This, she argues, fails to take account of: the extent to which the labour market in the context of a wider economic crisis is increasingly saturated by graduates (diminishing economic returns on HE); the impact of fees in shaping young people's decisions; or the role of cultural and moral aspects in decision-making about future careers.

Government policy in this view treats the development of aspiration as a rational, linear process in which the only barrier to the development of aspiration for HE is a lack of information about HE's benefits. Spohrer's (2011) critique suggests that government rhetoric identifies aspiration as the responsibility of the individual, and that it is up to the individual to take opportunities to fulfil those aspirations - playing down the role of context in pursuit of HE, particularly in relation to social and economic disadvantage. Additionally, Rose and Baird (2013) demonstrated that there is no shortage of aspirations for HE, suggesting that the context in which young people find themselves affects the opportunities available to them.

This article draws on an inter-disciplinary understanding of aspiration that challenges instrumentalist approaches. We use work that brings together the capability approach as developed by Sen (1999, 2010) and Nussbaum (2000, 2011) (see also Robeyns, 2005 and in relation to education specifically, Walker, 2005) with Bourdieu's (1986) ideas of habitus, field and different forms of capital, to understand the nature of decision-making and of aspiration for higher levels of education (Hart, 2012, 2016), in this case around access to RG universities.

Hart's analytical framework centres on the view that decision-making about university attendance needs to be seen as an aspect of the development of a broader 'capability to aspire'. A capability is 'a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being' (Sen, 1993, p. 30) and is 'thus a kind of freedom... the freedom to achieve various lifestyles' (Sen, 1999, p.75). For Sen, capabilities are 'options or choices open to the person, possible functionings from which a person may choose' (Crocker, 1995, p. 162). Sen describes functionings as 'the various things a person may value doing or being' (1999, p. 75) varying from straightforward survival needs to emotional states such as happiness and connectedness with others. The capability approach sits apart from policy discourses that rank aspirations. Instead 'a functioning is seen to have value if it allows the individual to flourish' (Hart, 2012, p. 41). This is significant here, because access to elite universities is not assumed to be necessarily preferable to other possible destinations after formal schooling, provided choices are made on the basis of autonomous, reasoned choice about the life that individuals will have reason to value in the future (see also Watts, 2012).

'Aspiration' on the other hand is both goal-oriented and concerns the future or agency of the self (Hart, 2012) – aspiring can be seen both as a functioning and a capability. This draws attention to the mechanisms and processes determining how young people interact with information to inform their decisions (Eccles, 2009; Oyserman and Destin, 2010). Eccles (2009) highlights the way in which young people's sense of who they are – their personal and collective identities – shapes what they value, and (alongside self-

concept, perceived abilities, and expectations of success) their aspirations and goals in life. However, the freedom and possibility of aspiring can also be viewed as a capability that differs between individuals. Thus an individual's capability to aspire can be seen as a freedom in its own right, and as a gateway to enabling further future capabilities and functionings. This view implies that the focus of policy and of schools needs to shift from one of 'raising aspirations' to attend university, to nurturing the capability to aspire through supporting young people to develop an aspiration set that will enable them to live the life they have reason to value. This may or may not include attendance at university in general or RG universities in particular: what is important is that young people should not automatically rule out university or, more specifically, RG university, as "not a place for them".

Understanding the role of the school also requires an explicit recognition of inequalities in the capability to aspire. This links to wider institutional and cultural barriers and facilitators that make it easier for some individuals to make informed decisions (Archer et al, 2014). As with Hart's (2012) study of the choices young people in Bradford and Sheffield made regarding participation in HE, our study is informed by a view of decision-making as mediated by cultural and institutional factors. Here, aspirations appear more fluid and subject to change over time than is often assumed in government policy.

Recognising the importance of context and the existence of inequalities in the capability to aspire, Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of habitus, field and capital become significant. We see an individual's habitus as developing from the beginning of life in relation to the social milieu of the home and family. Significantly, habitus is not necessarily determining – individuals can adapt or change their habitus through exposure to different forms of capital through their lives. Many critique Bourdieu's work for supporting a deficit model of learners from non-traditional academic backgrounds, with experiences of institutions determining eventual negative outcomes. Our view of aspiration, however, centres on the agency freedom of learners and highlights how institutions may or may not support development of aspirations.

Bourdieu describes economic capital generated through inherited wealth, family income or labour market participation, social capital accrued through social networks and interactions, and symbolic capital manifested as individual prestige or authority. Importantly, Bourdieu also proposes three forms of cultural capital: an embodied state (long lasting dispositions of the mind and body); the objectified state (cultural goods and artefacts such as books and computers); and the institutionalised state (such as educational qualifications, which valorise specific forms of knowledge, skill attitudes, habits and dispositions over others). Through possession of different forms of capital, individuals may be perceived as more or less well-off than others. Considering different forms of capital provides greater nuance to understanding the relative benefits of attendance at university and RG universities. Attending RG universities on average increases the economic capital available to individuals during their career, although this premium is significantly greater for those from high-income families (Britton et al, 2016; Belfield et al, 2018). This is important in relation to the 'bigger picture' of how not only economic but also different forms of social, symbolic and cultural capital are valued by individuals.

In Hart's (2012, 2016) view, exposure to different forms of capital is necessary but insufficient for nurturing the capability to aspire. She describes how parental aspirations for their children to attend university may be mediated by gendered cultural norms and values. Similarly, even if young people have exposure to different kinds of information that would potentially enable them to make informed choices about their future careers, they may be affected by peer group or media pressures. These mediating influences linked to context affect the extent to which individuals convert forms of cultural capital into individual capital, thereby affecting capability to aspire. Hart suggests that, depending on the degree of agency freedom that individuals exercise over their aspirations, these may be independently arrived at, shared with or guided by others and/or conflict with aspirations that parents, teachers, the government or the wider community might hold for individuals and groups.

Individuals also adapt their aspirations over time and in response to changing circumstances, for example, prior attainment, expectations of others, and sense of self-efficacy (Eccles, 2009; Oyserman et al, 2014). As Hart notes, some educational options may be considered unobtainable to a young person due to location, cost, or availability of pre-requisites. Hart goes on to consider whether young people adapt their aspirations to reflect what they believe is achievable: so even if a young person is very able academically, if they don't believe that attendance at a RG university is possible for "someone like them" then they may not include it in their aspirations. In the language of capabilities, this is an example of 'adapted preference' where an individual's capability to aspire is impacted by circumstance (Khader, 2013; Watts, 2012). This places an onus on the school to consider options available to young people, and understand that aspiring to various pathways is possible. Learning to 'play the game' of accessing RG universities needs to be understood against the complexity of the context in which an individual finds themselves. We argue that school plays a critical mediating role in these processes.

The Research Context

This research explores decision-making processes around HE applications of high-attaining learners in KS5 from low-performing schools and colleges. Low-performing schools (in the bottom 40% of average attainment at age 18) are a focus for widening participation in English universities: school average attainment is important in predicting HE destinations.

We worked with case studies of young people from a range of such institutions throughout their sixth form, to investigate decision making as it happened, from the young people's perspectives. We followed them from general initial thoughts about university, through exploration of courses and institutions, to application and response to offers. Specifically, we focus on the way in which schools worked with students to support their decision making, and how this was experienced by our participants. Young people's time in sixth form is when decisions regarding RG or other HE participation (rather than HE participation in general) are most acute.

This paper reports research that is part of a two-strand project. The first strand (see Tikly et al, 2016) involved secondary analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (LSYPE), a large, nationally representative dataset of young people born in 1990/91 with data collected from participants at yearly intervals from age 14 to age 21, on education and aspirations. We explored what predicted whether those in the top 25% of GCSE attainment would attend HE in general, and RG universities specifically. The LSYPE, however, included young people making decisions about university in 2006/07, before tuition fees increased and before the global economic recession, presenting a different social and economic context to the present.

The second strand, therefore, comprised case studies of an initial sample of 60 high-attaining students across six different institutions with low average attainment at A-level, during their sixth form career from September 2013 to July 2015. Case studies included two focus groups and three individual interviews with each student, and interviews with parents and teachers. This paper focuses on the student data. We do not focus specifically on the impact of tuition fees and the economic recession, but they form the backdrop to a more contemporary context than the LSYPE. We explore key individual-level and institutional-level factors involved in the decision-making process around university. Specifically, research questions addressed in this paper include:

- How do students decide which A level subjects to study, universities to apply for, and how to rank their choices following offers?
- How do students experience the role played by institutions in supporting these decisions?

Methodology

Institutional and Student Recruitment

Institutional recruitment took place in Summer 2013 from two different areas of England: a large urban conurbation with several local universities; and a smaller city and surrounding rural area, with fewer local universities. Schools and colleges were recruited according to three criteria: average A-level attainment (points per student) in the bottom 40% of institutions in England; at least 8 students per year achieving AAB at A-level (standard RG entry requirements); between them, a range of numbers of students going on to RG universities. Participating institutions all had high proportions of students whose parents had not been to university. Furthermore, they were in areas where other institutions with high average attainment tended to recruit most of the local high-attaining students. After our project's first year, one school stopped participating because a change in school staffing meant that the project was no longer seen as a priority. Consequently, students from five schools and colleges participated in the project for the duration, and students from one school participated for the first year only.

In September 2013, participating institutions identified students who achieved at least 5 A* or A grades at GCSE (English examinations taken at age 16), indicating potential to achieve RG entrance requirements at A-level (English examinations taken at age 18). Sixty students (19 males and 41 females) agreed to participate. Over the duration of the project, 17 students stopped participating (including those in the school who dropped

out), leaving 43 students who participated through both years of sixth form. There were five data collection sessions. Most students participated in all sessions, and no students participated in fewer than three.

Table 1 about here

As Table 1 shows, numbers of participants varied widely between institutions, mainly due to numbers meeting the GCSE attainment criteria. We worked with all students who fitted the criteria and consented to participating. We did not collect background data (Free School Meal eligibility, parental occupation/education) from institutions: the focus of our research was not specifically on social class. During the research we understood from the majority of students what their parents' educational and occupational backgrounds were. Eight students had two parents who had been to university, eight had one parent who had been to university, but for the majority neither parent had a degree. Eighteen of the original students, and fifteen who participated throughout, were from ethnic minorities. The students thus occupied different positions in relation to the fields of school, home and community, linked to their diverse backgrounds. This impacted prior exposure to different forms of capital and ability to convert these capitals into an aspiration set that included attendance at RG universities.

In this paper, our focus is on the role of low-performing schools in helping high-performing learners understand the higher education landscape. We use data from individual students to understand how they experience school provision, and how that provision relates to what they already know (or don't know), about HE.

Data Collection

Foci of data collection at different time periods can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

Broad themes and interesting topics that arose were explored in focus groups and interviews with students. Focus groups lasted around an hour with 4-8 students in each group. Individual interviews generally lasted 30-40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data collection sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed, although two participants declined to be recorded so notes were taken. The dataset was managed through an NVivo database. We broadly followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic content analysis. Initial codes were created from the content of the data (supported by journal notes and reflections made immediately after data collection sessions), and from what was important theoretically. The process of coding allowed us to understand the content and structure of the data, and identify key themes.

Research Ethics

The project was conducted according to ethical guidelines of the host institution and BERA.

Findings

This paper focuses on the research questions outlined above, particularly on the role of schools in supporting young people's capability to aspire.

Sources of influence

This section focuses on the key sources of influence affecting young people's decision making. It draws attention to forms of social, symbolic and cultural capital available to young people at school and at home, and the range of barriers and facilitators that enable young people to develop the capability to convert this capital into an aspiration set.

Schools and Colleges: Students drew support for decision making from schools and colleges in many ways. Most notable was the extent to which students had opportunities to experience different universities, through masterclasses, campus visits, events aimed at school/college students, and mentoring by current university students. Those from institutions sending more students to RG were more familiar and comfortable with the concept of university, the ways universities worked with students, and the vocabulary used in university culture. To these students, university was an "everyday concept" (see also Thiele et al, 2017). These institutions encouraged students to take up many opportunities to engage with different universities. This echoes the strong framing of HE in a school discussed by Donnelly (2015), with particular activities and discourses demonstrating implicit expectations from the school that students would go to university. In Bourdieu's terms it can be seen as a means for schools to compensate for the relative absence of university-focused social and cultural capital in learners' home backgrounds.

Students at the other three institutions in our project seemed to have had fewer opportunities to engage with university. Consequently many of them did not feel familiar with what universities were like and the range of HE opportunities available. "Normalization" of university, then, appeared as a key influence in schools' and colleges' support for students' decision making. A minority of participants (some whose parents had been to university) were comfortable with the concept of university without the support of the school – but many needed additional input to "socialize" them into university language and culture. In Bourdieu's terms, some already embodied a disposition to HE whilst for others school had a more prominent significance in developing attitudes and dispositions to HE.

As students made decisions about which universities to apply to, many asked teachers about which universities they attended. Students thus gained discrete pieces of information from particular perspectives. Young people with few resources at home seek advice and information from other sources, but we must consider how holistic that advice is and how young people interact with it. The role of schools, then, in supporting young people to understand what is possible in HE, is crucial. This builds on Archer et al's (2014) findings around the development of broader career aspirations: young people from more advantaged backgrounds have more sophisticated support from home, than young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Our findings indicate that this is also important in making decisions about HE.

When case-study students discussed A-level subject choice at the start of Year 12, this centred around “keeping their options open” by choosing a range of subjects, without recognizing that by *not* choosing particular subjects they were ruling themselves out of many courses offered at RG universities. Many RG university courses require one or more facilitating subjects: that is Maths, Further Maths, English Literature, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Geography, History, Modern and Classical Languages. How schools and colleges advise young people around A-level choices, then, is important. Schools and colleges may feel that it is important that young people experience a range of subjects at A-level, but they may be limiting future availability of HE opportunities. The availability of different subjects at A-level appears to be more limited for many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as highlighted by Abrahams (2018) and Dilnot (2016), particularly in regard to the A-level portfolio offer from the institutions they attend.

Families: Participants often turned to families and family friends for advice about universities and future careers. Most participants’ parents had not been to university, so there was little discussion of different universities at home. This accords with previous studies exploring the relationship between socio-economic background and aspirations more generally (Archer et al, 2014) and attendance at university specifically (e.g. Hart, 2013; Thiele et al, 2017). Many students knew someone who had been to university, however, whether an older relation (e.g. cousin, older sibling, aunt or uncle) or family friend, and sought advice from them. In the absence of a range of perspectives, and with little other information, it was difficult for students to develop an appreciation of different university contexts. Particularly earlier on in the sixth form, many students were unaware of the diversity of HE opportunities. Without this awareness it can be difficult to develop a critical view of the select pieces of information obtained. In short, many participants had little social or cultural capital at home to understand the range of opportunities available, so tended to place a lot of weight on the individual pieces of information they received. This again highlights the role of schools and colleges in informing students about the breadth of opportunities that are available in HE: as Archer et al (2014) highlighted, there is a need to “focus on diversifying and informing aspirations (as opposed to ‘raising’ them)” (p.79).

A finding from the present study that is not widely reflected in the literature is that advice and influence from families did not just come in the form of information about universities. Many participants (particularly those whose parents had not been to HE) had an instrumentalist view of education, viewing university as training for a job. Some described their parents steering them towards “professional training”, such as law, medicine, or dentistry, irrespective of participants’ academic passions or strengths. For participants whose parents had not been to university, HE was rarely considered a place to learn “how to think”, or to learn generic skills to apply in the job market. Participants generally believed that their parents wanted them to go to university, but in the context of £9,000 per year tuition fees, it was hard for some (particularly those from low-income families) to justify attendance unless training for a profession or specific job. Similarly, Callendar and Jackson (2008) found that young people who held a more instrumental view of education were likely to opt for “lower cost” HE options, such as attending local

universities so they could still live with their family. Callendar and Jackson's research context, however, was when tuition fees were £1,000 per year, paid up-front on a means-tested basis. The instrumentalist view of education may now play an even more important role for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Factors Considered by Young People in Decision Making

This section focuses on factors identified by participants as important for their decision-making about which university to attend. It illustrates challenges faced by students seeking to traverse the fields between school and different kinds of university, and the potential role of schools in assisting with this transition.

University-Specific Issues: The process of deciding which university (rather than which course or subject), before students submitted their UCAS application, mainly focused on university characteristics rather than those of the student. The location, or proximity to home was important for many, particularly those from ethnic minorities and from white, lower SES backgrounds (according with Callendar and Jackson's (2008) findings). These students wanted to attend a university that would enable them to stay living at home – either for a cheaper cost of living, or for cultural reasons (many female participants from Muslim families either wanted to stay at home with their families, or said that their parents wanted them to stay at home). This limits the range of possible universities – and the extent of limitation varies by location. One of the case study localities had nine universities (including two RG universities) within commuting distance, but the other had two within the local city (one of which was RG), and two in a neighbouring city.

University demographics were also important: one of the RG universities in the conurbation with several universities has a wide range of ethnic minority students from a diversity of educational backgrounds. The RG university in the other area has an intake of mainly white middle-class students, many from independent schools. Several participants were unsure whether they would “fit in” at the latter university. The first area has a much larger population of local sixth-form students from ethnic minorities and/or more deprived backgrounds, making it easier, therefore, for the local RG university to recruit local students from non-traditional (widening participation) backgrounds. The RG university in the second area, however, being situated within a smaller, less densely-populated city, has a smaller pool of local non-traditional potential students from which to recruit. Croxford and Raffe (2015) highlighted that higher-status universities (such as RG) were more likely to recruit from outside of their region, from independent schools, and from students with higher SES backgrounds. There are 24 RG universities in the UK, and many more non-RG universities. Therefore, if a student wants to go to a local university, a RG university may not be an option. Finn (2017) discusses student mobility in relational and emotional terms: students' ties to their family and locality, alongside their expectations about the social aspects of university, contribute to decisions about which university to attend.

Familiarity with a university influenced participants. This relates to activities provided by schools to develop students' engagement with (often local) universities. Participants spoke enthusiastically about applying to universities they had visited for masterclasses or residential events. One of the RG universities in the large conurbation provided

several opportunities for local school students, and had particularly close relationships with six local schools situated in economically deprived areas. This university had a high profile for students: they were familiar with it, and could imagine themselves as students there – more so than at other universities, either in the same area or in different cities that they had not visited.

When writing UCAS applications, students tried to be strategic in making their application attractive, by seeking out relevant work experience, and ensuring that they had selected a range of subjects at AS and A2. Students were aware of the impact of their AS grades and predicted A2 grades on the likelihood of being given an offer. However, very few were aware of facilitating subjects at A2. Furthermore, few were aware of the many different ways in which universities make admissions decisions, so were basing their application strategy on the basis of limited or incorrect information. This again highlights the need for schools to work in partnership with universities, and to ensure that students have the necessary understanding during the application process.

Student-Specific Issues: Individual student characteristics, preferences, and backgrounds were also important to students when making decisions. Students' views on the purpose of education, and in particular of university, were important when deciding on subject choice. Similarly, Goyette and Mullen (2006), in their study of undergraduates in the US, found that those from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to choose vocational routes in HE. We suggest that while an instrumentalist view of education may not evidence an awareness of different roles that universities can play in education, potentially few participants had the financial resources to allow the "luxury" of seeing university primarily as a life-changing experience, or a means of developing different ways of thinking.

There was a dynamic relationship between participants' subject choice at AS level, AS grades achieved and predicted A2 grades, and aspirations regarding university and subject choice. Most chose AS subjects before they had a clear aspiration of what they wanted to study at university, or knew the requirements for particular courses. Many chose a range of subjects to "keep their options open", although some chose AS subjects with a particular course in mind, such as Medicine. As participants progressed through Year 12, aspirations regarding university shaped further. Many revised their aspirations – either because they had not chosen the required subjects for their desired courses (again highlighting the importance of appropriate advice from schools), or because AS and predicted A2 grades were not sufficient. Those who changed their aspirations around which universities they were aiming for, to fit in with lower-than-hoped-for grades, then reframed how they discussed benefits of particular universities. Other participants re-started their AS levels, or re-took particular modules to improve grades. Some decided to take a gap year and apply once they knew their grades, to be more confident of acceptance. This strategic response to a lower-than-hoped-for performance was sometimes suggested by institutions: past students had been accepted onto courses such as Medicine with good grades from completed A-levels, but would not have been accepted if applying with AS grades only at the start of Y13.

Other participants applied for their “second choice” of university subject at the start of Y13. If they received higher-than-expected grades at A2, they would take a gap year and apply for their first choice for which they needed higher grades. Few were planning on taking a gap year for travel and “experience”. Instead, this was a strategic approach to maximizing chances of successful application to a desired course. In some cases, participants surpassed their own expectations regarding AS grades, so revised their aspirations towards a course requiring higher grades. Although not related to information about specific universities, this strategic behavior in response to AS grades can be seen as “playing the game” of UCAS application. This relates to “contingent” decision makers amongst high achievers, highlighted by UCAS (2012): students who are “less confident, less competitive, and apply to HE based on numerous factors” (p.42), may have lower self-efficacy about their academic ability, and often come from contexts where the levels of attainment needed for entrance to highly selective HE institutions are not the norm.

The longitudinal nature of the case studies demonstrated that participants’ aspirations changed dramatically over their sixth form. For the most part, they became more confident in understanding what university might be like. Some started out focused on a particular course or university (often on the basis of limited information from conversations about the experiences of an older family member or friend), and over the course of their sixth form before UCAS applications broadened their horizons to understand the range of opportunities that they could pursue. Others started their sixth form overwhelmed by the choice available, and eventually started to bring their aspirations into focus.

Discussion: How schools can nurture the capability to aspire

Our findings highlight the role of information in supporting the agency of young people to make decisions. In contrast to assumptions underlying government policy, however, providing information alone is insufficient. To compensate for differences in access to social and cultural capital according to young people’s backgrounds (Archer et al, 2014), schools need to better understand the information that young people have access to in the home. Some make decisions with incomplete and imperfect information, assigning disproportionate weight to certain sources. Transparency of the system is important: students need to understand different ways of assessing university quality; different criteria used to assess applications; and likelihood of success (and have a sense of what success is). However, as Diamond et al (2012) highlight, the amount of information provided to students at different points in their decision making must be balanced with their capacity to process that information.

We now return to the potential role of schools in supporting the capability for practical reason in young people, particularly those who may not have access to the necessary social and cultural capital to enable them to make informed decisions. A focus on quality, comprehensiveness and consistency of advice and information from schools may help students in decision making. Supporting familiarity with universities through visits can help students see university as a possibility. This recognizes the agency of high-attaining learners and their capacity for rational decision-making based on their own concept of what is best for them, rather than simply presenting RG universities as the

“best option”. One of the key contributions of this research is to acknowledge that high-attaining learners from different backgrounds may require different kinds and degrees of support from schools, tailored to an awareness of their specific context, family, and cultural background. This may involve schools more actively engaging in dialogue with families around different options available to young people and how these relate to future career and life aspirations.

Our longitudinal case studies highlight key “crunch” points in students’ decision-making processes: choice of A levels; selecting degree subject; receiving predicted grades; UCAS applications (both content and timing in relation to grades); and receiving offers from universities. This demonstrates another contribution of this research: the recognition that aspirations are fluid, and evolve over time, due in large part to what happens at these key crunch points. This is particularly important in considering how and when aspirations can be shaped and nurtured – and crucially highlights where the capability to aspire can be developed. If students are well-supported by schools, it is these points where students can realise their capabilities. If students are not well-supported, crunch points can become missed opportunities, and decisions may be made based on incomplete and imperfect information. This also recognizes, in Eccles’ (2009) terms, the complex nature of decision-making: it links to wider processes of maturation, and individual and collective identity formation, including the emergent nature of long-term aspirations. As Hannon et al (2017) discuss, there are structural factors beyond academic ability that either support or hinder young people in developing aspirations. Awareness of these structural factors can help students navigate university applications.

In practice, students may benefit from a sustained relationship with school staff so they can access holistic support at each of these stages. Crucially, and with reference Tikly et al (2016), advice needs to focus more clearly on the choice of facilitating subjects at A-level. This cannot be taken out of context: earlier advice is also important around GCSE subject choice that can then lead on to facilitating subjects (see also Dilnot, 2016).

We suggest that schools may benefit from relationships with HEIs to help develop more holistic support. This could be in terms of: defining the role(s) of teacher(s) with special responsibility for HE; providing support for other key players such as parents and subject teachers; and offering timely, appropriate advice to students. This recognizes the often sporadic, partial and incoherent nature of advice available to high-attaining learners (particularly those from families with little HE experience), about the range of options available and how different HE options link to longer-term career aspirations. RG universities may not always be the best option, but it is important that students have the capability to make choices, and RG universities can be part of their set of valued functionings. Students need information to critically engage with the concept of university quality and consider what is best for them.

We foreground the role of schools (in particular, schools with low average attainment) in supporting young people’s decision making. Attainment is obviously at the core of schools’ agendas, and is most important in young people’s progression to HE. With limited resource, schools must make decisions about where to target support. Nonetheless, schools have a responsibility to ensure that young people are well-

informed about opportunities and pathways into HE. This will help to ensure that young people from families who have limited or partial information about HE are not ruling out particular pathways without a clear understanding of what they entail. Further research could explore the effects of being in a low-performing school on learners from different backgrounds (such as ethnicity, parental education, parental employment and so on). Here, however, we focus on the role of the school. It may be that schools can never fully “compensate” for differences in access to cultural capital in the home but our research highlights that schools can be aware of these differences and intervene at critical points in progression through schooling to support all students’ capability to aspire.

Conclusion

In this paper we have moved away from the deficit focus on individuals, according to levels of disadvantage and social class, in the literature on widening participation as highlighted by Donnelly and Evans (2015). Social class is part of the context for this research, but is not the main focus. Instead we foreground the importance of school context in supporting young people’s agency freedom and capability to aspire through informed decision making around HE. Schools have a role to play in how students can make informed decisions and come to value particular pathways. The contribution of this paper is to highlight crunch points in young people’s decision making about university applications, and to highlight the importance of those crunch points for students in low-performing schools. We demonstrate how the capabilities approach can help us understand how such schools can support young people through those crunch points, with consideration of students’ existing understandings as part of their decision-making profile. This points to the need to focus on the quality, comprehensiveness and consistency of advice and information provided to high-attaining learners, to inform decision-making at key points. Universities need to work alongside each other to provide targeted support for schools and school clusters based on best practice in areas such as defining the role(s) of teacher(s) with special responsibility for HE, providing support for other key players including subject teachers and parents, and understanding the nature, frequency, type of advice and information offered to high-attaining learners. This recognizes the pivotal role played by these teachers but also the diversity in the way that these roles are currently defined and unevenness in how effectively these roles are executed. It also emphasises the importance of engaging with the entire network of ‘significant others’ in the decision-making process, to draw on a range of relevant expertise/ experience but also to encourage coherence and consistency in the advice offered to learners. The context of our research, and the focus on low-performing schools, is particularly relevant to the UK education system. Nonetheless, highlighting that there are key crunch points during decision making around progression to HE, has a broader relevance given the global nature of the widening participation debate in societies marked by differences in access to forms of social and cultural capital. Such research could usefully be extended to other national contexts. Crunch points may differ depending on the national context and different mechanisms of university applications, but encouraging schools to focus on where or when these crunch points are, and tailor support accordingly, is an important contribution of this research. Differences in social and cultural capital between young people from different educational and social backgrounds could then be mitigated to some extent. Through nurturing a broader capability to aspire, schools can enable learners to more effectively ‘play the game’ of

RG university admissions, if this is their informed choice once all options have been presented to them.

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Table 1: Numbers of students participating in each institution.

| | <i>Numbers of students going on to RG Universities from this institution over the last three years</i> | <i>Number of participating students at the start of the project</i> | <i>Number of participating students for the duration of the project</i> |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|
| <i>School A</i> | 5 or more | 10 | 9 |
| <i>School B</i> | 5 or more | 7 | 5 |
| <i>School C</i> | 0-2 | 5 | 5 |
| <i>School D</i> | 0-2 | 13 | 0 (School Dropout) |
| <i>College A</i> | 5 or more | 18 | 17 |
| <i>College B</i> | 0-2 | 7 | 7 |

Table 2: Data collection time periods and topics covered in discussions

| <i>Time</i> | <i>Event</i> | <i>Topics Covered</i> |
|--------------------|----------------------|---|
| Autumn 2013 | Focus Group | <i>Broad life aspirations; Educational aspirations; Subjects chosen at AS level; What might university be like; Peer group ambitions or aspirations; How are they feeling about life after sixth form.</i> |
| Spring 2014 | Individual Interview | <i>Plans for after Y13; Mock exam results; Self-image as a learner; Influences on educational pathway; Parental background and involvement in education; Interactions with university students (including friends and family); Interactions with universities; Differences between universities; Cost of going to university; Purpose of going to university.</i> |
| Summer 2014 | Focus Group | <i>Reflection on Y12; Expectations of Y13; Ideas about which HE institutions (if any) they might apply to; Expectations of UCAS application content and process; Support for UCAS applications; Experiences of and approaches to decision making.</i> |
| Autumn 2015 | Individual Interview | <i>AS grades; Subjects chosen at A2; Universities and courses applied for and why; Who helped with decision making; Any preferences among courses applied for; Content of personal statement; Parents' and peers' involvement in application process.</i> |
| Spring 2015 | Individual Interview | <i>Offers received from universities; First and second choice offers; Application process and support received; Confidence in A2 grades; Expectations of university; Expectations of the more distant future; Ideas about university quality; Ideas around how to support WP students into RG university.</i> |